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## The Flash and the Grandeur: A Short Study of the Relation Among MacDonald, Lewis, and Wordsworth<sup>1</sup>

Jim Prothero

While searching for dissertation topics, I found to my chagrin that William Wordsworth's influence on George MacDonald has already been well documented, especially by Roderick McGillis. Rejecting Calvinism, MacDonald eventually found a way to merge the vision of Romanticism with the Christian faith, something that only the later Wordsworth may have done. Thus stories like *Sir Gibbie* are essentially Wordsworthian visions set in MacDonald's Scotland. Gibbie is the innocent child in the industrially evil city of Aberdeen. A brutal murder sends him flying west along the River Dee till he makes his way to a humble shepherd's cottage high on a lonely mountain that could just as easily be a fell in Wordsworth's Lake District. The shepherd people are innocent, wise, and good, as in Wordsworth. And though the ending is happier than some Wordsworthian tales, the final joy is reached only through pain and the downfall of the great from their heights.

From MacDonald, C. S. Lewis got certain central ideas and a sense of vision. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Lewis got his central vision from Wordsworth via MacDonald, and that his subsequent enjoyment of *The Prelude* was because he recognized a quality he had previously found in MacDonald's work. For Wordsworth "there is a spirit in the wood," and that spirit, found by him in nature, elevated his heart and mind so that by its influence, he believed he became a better person. Nature and the influence of nature possess, for Wordsworth, a morally improving influence, though as he pointed out in his poem "Peter Bell" simple contact with nature is useless without an open heart that can take in the lessons it teaches. This alone would be unmoving though significant were it not for the sense of grandeur and awe that is simply overwhelming; we read some of his work and feel that we are on the borders of heaven itself.

MacDonald on occasion uses not only Wordsworthian scenes and characters, as in *Sir Gibbie*, and ideas, such as the innocence and wisdom of a child, as seen in the young mute, Gibbie, but also Wordsworthian flash and grandeur, the sweep of Wordsworthian optimism. MacDonald's stories, even more than his novels and his fairy tales, ring with the numinous sense that one finds in

1. The following is an excerpt from a study on Lewis and Wordsworth still in progress. **[end of page 35]**

Wordsworth. And this brings us to the second thing that MacDonald got out of Wordsworth: the sense that though this present world is full of splendor, splendor exists somehow beyond. And furthermore, this splendor is and will be in spite of every human pain and misery of this age. For Wordsworth, this is vague at the beginning of his poetic career, but it blossoms between 1802 and 1804 when he wrote the poem that MacDonald most comments on: “Ode on Intimations of Immortality.”

As a convinced Christian, MacDonald equates this vague Wordsworthian sense of glory beyond the edges of the known world with the Christian Heaven, as does Lewis after him. But the other element here is the embracing of pain as the price we pay on this earthly journey to the country where we always belonged. Writer John Cowper Powys has called Wordsworth a “somewhat grim and austere optimist” because of his refusal to turn from human pain in building his vision. And certainly he knew pain. (It is interesting that Wordsworth, MacDonald, and Lewis each lost their mothers at age eight) Wordsworth and MacDonald bore through the premature deaths of beloved friends, siblings, and children. MacDonald referred to tuberculosis as “the family attendant.” Lewis lost his mother, father, and wife to cancer. These three writers vigorously deny the notion in much twentieth-century literature that the mystery of death makes a lie of all hope and all joy.

And so we might say that Wordsworth sensed the spirit in the woods and the heavenly glory in nature; MacDonald, perhaps the father of Christian Romanticism, affirmed that glory and attributed it to the Christian God. G. K. Chesterton, who might be accused of being a Christian Romantic, pays tribute to MacDonald in his foreword to Greville MacDonald’s biography of his parents. And MacDonald is certainly the founder of the tradition of literary fantasy as a subtle vehicle for the Christian message.

Wordsworth played a similar role. In the later years of his long life, he was venerated by the Victorians for the moral value of his literature, a role he never denied or tried to belittle. His long poem, *The Excursion*, the poem most of his contemporaries best knew him by, includes extensive sections of dialogue by a holy pastor counseling a right view of life and its tragedies. It resembles, in fact, preachy passages in MacDonald’s novels where the action stops for a character to sermonize. Wordsworth only brushed the edges of fantasy in his work, the people and places he knew being so much more

intense for him as central images. MacDonald translated that sensibility, and Lewis translated MacDonald.

This brings us to the question of how Lewis regarded Wordsworth.

[36] We know that he regularly reread *The Prelude* and took the title of his autobiography from a Wordsworth sonnet, yet when he mentions Wordsworth, he is critical. Wordsworth saw intimations of redemption in nature, but Lewis argued that Romanticism and even Nature herself need redemption. He warned that both eroticism and occultism lurk on the quest for Romantic longing, or *Sehnsucht* (*Christian Reflections* 22). In “The Weight of Glory” Lewis scolds Wordsworth for mistaking moments of romantic longing for the past: “Wordsworth’s expedient was to identify it with certain moments in his own past. But this is all a cheat. If Wordsworth had gone back to those moments in the past, he would not have found the thing itself, but only a reminder of it” (*Weight of Glory* 7).

Lewis touched on Romanticism’s fatal flaw. The Romantics rejected the focus on reason that was characteristic of the Enlightenment (or, as Peter Kreeft would have it, the ‘Endarkenment’), and trusted the imagination and the feelings as guides in the search for truth and understanding in this world. Early in life, Wordsworth shared with his friend Coleridge, Rousseau’s belief in the goodness of human nature and the eventual perfection of human existence. The bloody course of the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon Buonaparte changed both their views on this. And perhaps Coleridge, being the more abstract thinker of the two, saw Romanticism’s fatal flaw clearer than Wordsworth did at the time. One reading of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” given by a former teacher of mine at Cal State Fullerton, Dr. Art Bell, sees the poem as a subconscious realization of Coleridge’s that the Romantic faith in imagination and feeling bears the seeds of its own destruction.

In Coleridge’s poem, the River Alph, which feeds the beauty of the sacred pleasure dome, is thrown up from the vast cavern, which is the same cavern from which Kubla hears ancestral voices prophesying war. Thus the source of beauty is the same as the source of violence and conflict. The poem stops twice and starts three times because, according to Coleridge, he was interrupted by a caller from remembering the dream from which he drew the poem. Art Bell argues, however, that Coleridge, consciously or subconsciously realizing that he could not write a Romantic poem about the failure of Romanticism, is unable to go on. He wishes in the last stanza for a return of the powers that would cause people to view him in “holy dread” and to “Weave a circle round him thrice”—that is, that they would

protect themselves from his unholy magic. “For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
/ And drunk the milk of Paradise.” But notice this follows the sentence  
“Could I revive within me”; Coleridge’s speaker recognizes that this magical  
knowledge cannot be recovered. And [37] so the poem ends with the dream  
of Romanticism lost. Put plainly, Romanticism only works as a philosophy if  
one can maintain a fairly rosy picture of human nature for its validity. For it  
is one thing to reason what is right and true and yet another thing to do it.

George MacDonald created a redeemed Romanticism. By sanctifying  
it through the cross, he answers Coleridge’s question regarding the dark side  
of Romanticism. For MacDonald, Romantic longing is longing after Christ’s  
Heaven, as Mossy and Tangle discover in “The Golden Key.” Yet Mossy  
and Tangle both have to die to become fully alive, and so the burden of dark  
human nature is healed in Christ’s sacrifice and in the individual’s death  
to the old life and rebirth as a new man and woman. Perhaps Henry Crabb  
Robinson left his bequest to MacDonald in appreciation of this sanctifying  
of Romanticism. Yet, MacDonald did not clearly answer the question of the  
place of reason within the whole. That was left for Lewis.

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